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AUTHOR Zak, Frances
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ABSTRACT

Writing teachers are constantly confronted with the problem of forming effective responding strategies to help student writing improve. Even though the way writing is taught has shifted from a product- to a process-oriented approach, teachers' responding practices seem particularly resistant to modification. "Practitioner lore" suggests that students do not necessarily read or understand the comments teachers make on their papers. Also, all the fixing and correcting of mechanical errors, spelling, and grammar may be of no use because when students revise, a new set of problems arise for students. Sometimes, no responding at all can yield surprising results. Students' writing can improve with time, lots of writing experiences and feedback, and maturity--no matter what teachers write on student papers. Other strategies can help improve students' writing: (1) provide opportunities in every class for every student to write, to read texts aloud, to listen to their own and others' papers, and to talk about writing; (2) open up the conversation of response in which the teacher is the only one reader/responder among many; (3) open up the conversation of evaluation; (4) provide students with alternative strategies for responding; (5) encourage students to read their papers carefully, listening to the words, ideas, and images; and (6) plan to publish. By doing less, teachers can be liberated, freed from the onerous task of endless responding to reclaim the pleasures of teaching writing. (RS)

RESPONDING TO STUDENT PAPERS: WHEN LESS IS MORE

A Talk by Frances Zak Writing Programs SUNY/Stony Brook Stony Brook, NY 11794

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E-Mail: FZAK@SBCCMAIL.BITNET
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Writing teachers are constantly confronted with the problem of forming effective responding strategies to help student writing improve.

According to Nancy Sommers, in her 1982 article, "Responding to Student Writing," most teachers estimate it takes them at least 20 to 40 minutes to comment on an individual student paper..." And, she confirms what every English teacher already knows, that "More than any other enterprise in the teaching of writing, responding to and commenting on student papers consumes the largest proportion of our time."

When I read Sommers' article, I assumed she was talking about papers in standard Freshman English composition classes, where the majority of students are native American speakers and writers. I can't help but wonder what she might say about the average time teachers spend "correcting the grammar" and responding to the papers of second language speakers. Papers of unskilled and inexperienced writers often make even greater demands upon our responding time and energies.

Why do teachers spend so much time in this activity with so little evidence that all the time spent responding, marking and correcting, is doing any good? Is it possible that teachers tend to overvalue their responding, or believe there is a direct relationship between what they say and do on student papers and what actually happens on those papers? Do teachers believe, in a bit of Janet Emig's magical thinking, that if they don't respond, changes won't be made and revisions won't be suggested, that it will be their fault if students' writing does not improve? Or, if they don't comment on papers, they are not doing their job, not being responsible?

My talk addresses these questions. In addition, I propose an approach which reverses traditional beliefs and practices and presents possibilities for how we can reduce the time spent responding on our students' papers, and still be truly effective in achieving the goal of change and improvement in our students' writing.

1977. Mina Shaughnessy reports that she was "stunned and bewildered" when she encountered the papers of her first sections of basic writers, and in her now-classic book, Errors and Expectations, proposed that her students wrote the way they did, not because they were slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they were beginners and were learning by their mistakes. She called for a frontal

attack on error to help these students improve their writing. Teachers have been marking and correcting what we loosely call "grammar errors" ever since.

Spring, 1991. In her Journal of Basic Writing article, "Fluency First: Revising the Traditional ESL Sequence," Adele MacGowan-Gilhooley submits that "one way to address the problem is by reversing the traditional grammar-focused approach...to help...students acquire greater fluency and knowledge and thus write more effective, and even more correct pieces.

A number of researchers independently came to similar conclusions: A memo from Peter Elbow, 1983. "The goals of EGC 100? FLUENCY sums it up: To get students so they can get their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions down on paper; relatively quickly and without agony; and to choose the good parts and clean them up so that they feel right to the writer and are clear to readers." Fluency First.

Knoblauch and Brannon. 1984. From Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing. "...the priorities of the writing workshop--fluency, then clarity, then correctness.

MacGowan-Gilhooley quotes ESL researchers, Freeman and Freeman, who advocate "whole-language" principles for second language learning. They sounded good to me for all language learners, and useful for helping evolving writers improve their writing, so I will share them with you.

1) Language learning should be learner-centered.
2) Language instruction should employ listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
3) Language in the classroom should be meaningful and functional.
4) Language is learned through social interaction.
And finally, 5) language is learned when teachers have faith in learners.

The 20-40 minutes of responding per paper Summers mentions may have seemed appropriate at a time when a product-oriented model for the teaching of writing prevailed. And when the error-correction approach seemed to assume that "correct writing was equivalent to good writing." And when response was almost entirely teacher-centered.

In the decade since Sommer's article, the way we teach writing has shifted dramatically, from a product to a process-oriented approach, in which authority is decentered, collaboration is encouraged, and error-correction, or copy-editing, is seen as the last step in the process of revising multiple drafts over time. Group work and peer feedback have become fairly standard.

Yet, it would appear that teachers' responding practices in those same process-oriented classrooms have seemed peculiarly resistant to modification and change. I can't help but wonder how

much time teachers still spend at home marking and correcting and commenting on student papers.

I, too, used to spend vast amounts of time, endless hours, engaged in that very activity. And, as if the feeling of resentment at spending all that time wasn't enough, another worse feeling kept creeping in, the feeling of doubt that maybe all that responding and time spent wasn't helping students much at all and maybe it was even a waste of time. Was there ever any evidence that all that time spent and all that marking and correcting and red-pencilling was doing any good?

From the "practitioner lore," as Steve North calls it, conversations with other instructors suggested that students did not necessarily read the long and often detailed comments at the end of their papers, and when they did read them, much of the time they didn't understand them. And frequently, I must admit, when I go back and look over comments I've made on papers in past years, I don't understand them either.

To make matters worse, research informs us, all that fixing and correcting of mechanical errors, spelling, grammar and the like, is of no use at all, at least in early drafts of papers, because when students revise, a new set of problems presents itself for the student writers to deal with. I began to question the value of all that responding.

Why do teachers spend so much time responding? Sommers believed that responding could be a powerful force for positive change when it centers on the revision process, that comments "create the motive for doing something different in the next draft; that is, thoughtful comments create the motive for revising." She wrote, "We comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of a reader, to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves, because, ultimately, we believe that becoming such a reader will help them to evaluate what they have written and develop control over their writing."

In a paper entitled "Improving Written Communication Through Minimal Feedback," psychologists Traxler and Gernsbacher ran an experiment which confirmed that "even minimal feedback helps writers to envision how readers will interpret their texts, and thus helps writers to convey their ideas successfully."

Still, many teachers continue to respond reflexively, doing onto others as was done onto them, because of the belief that commenting is a basic teacherly task for which we are responsible; if we don't comment or respond, we are not doing our job; thus, we are irresponsible.

In Writing Without Teachers, Peter Elbow points out that teachers need students in order to teach, but students don't need teachers in order to learn. Students learn, but not necessarily because we teach them.

Sometimes, no responding at all can yield surprising results. Elbow maintains that student writing will improve with time, lots of writing experiences and feedback, and maturity, no matter what you do on student papers. I have returned drafts of narratives, for example, to students with no marks or comments at all, and told them simply to take their papers home and make them better. And they came back better.

Now, you know that when we say a paper is "better," we put our heads on the block. We are immediately challenged: "What do you mean by `better?' " It's a tricky issue, to be sure, since, although many would like to think otherwise, there is no objective measure. I say the narrative comes back "better" when it is submitted with more information, more detail, data, features such as dialogue, description, analogies, and humor. Better also means that some mechanical errors on the drafts have been corrected.

What took place between the writing of the two drafts may help to explain the changes. In class, rich discussion about the texts through group and partner exchanges and a great deal of talk about writing between the students and me foregrounded issues relevant to writing narrative. Freeman tells us that "the key to ...language acquisition in ESL is plentiful interaction with more knowledgeable others."

Maybe we have something to learn from a related discipline. I'm beginning to think that "plentiful interaction with more knowledgeable others" can also contribute to making writing improve; oral support activities which are supplemental to, but could also preclude, writing on student papers.

What else may help? Involvement. Focus. Commitment to the task. Total immersion in a verbal culture in class. It may be possible, too, that what I call intangibles and invisibles affect student writing. What Freeman calls "faith in learners." A students' belief that a teacher is vested in her/his writing improvement, and cares. A belief that a teacher actually reads the writing, and, however briefly, speaks to the writing in a positive, supportive, and non-judgmental way, so that a student begins to feel more confident and self-assured about his writing abilities.

Thus, I, too, would now like to propose we reverse the stance of traditional belief and practice and suggest that teachers can do more to help their students by doing less and by relegating their own responding activities to a much smaller role in their teaching.

My motivation for trying to find a better and easier way to help my students is similar to Jane Tompkins'idea in her article, "Pedagogy of the Distressed." I, too, am getting tired, tired of spending my life's hours in a practice which has questionable value and which no longer seems appropriate or effective in my process-oriented classroom.

Perhaps other strategies, which can take place in class, can help our students' writing improve, with teachers doing considerably less responding on papers, and spending considerably less time at home working on individual student papers.

1. Provide opportunities in every class for every student to write, to read texts aloud, to listen to their own and others' papers and to talk about the writing. Writing and reading feed each other. Elbow says reading and writing belong together. Like love and marriage. Horse and carriage. In addition, the students' own active involvement in literacy skills improves writing.

2. Open up the conversation of response in which the teacher is only one reader/responder among many. Talk with the students about useful ways to discuss writing. Give the students credit for being thoughtful and smart. They know how to read. They know what they like when they hear it. They know where and when they are confused and don't understand what they read. They know where and when in a text they would like or need more information or facts or examples. Give them the opportunity in class to exercise these critical abilities. The more they read and respond to each others' texts, the better they will write, read and revise their own.

3. Open up the conversation of evaluation. Encourage the students to talk about and think about "what makes good writing" to reflect on and articulate why they like one piece of writing over another and on what makes an individual piece "work."

4. Provide students with alternative strategies for responding. For example, after a student has read her paper, ask group members to repeat any line they heard and can remember, or a line they liked, or retell the paper in their own words. Or ask them to tell the reader what they noticed about the text. They can reply to the text, respond to human situations. And they can ask questions, or make requests for more information. These techniques enhance their listening and analytic skills.

5. Encourage students to carefully read their papers and listen to the words, the ideas, the meanings before handing them in. Inevitably, when students read texts aloud in groups, they hear things they didn't realize were there, and often make written changes while they are reading. Students tend to write the paper and hear it inside their own heads only. Significant revision and correction can be suggested from listening to and seeing the words on the page in the presence of an audience. In addition, encourage students to ask someone else to read their pieces before they turn them in, and to give them feedback. Enhanced audience awareness tends to help students develop their own critical consciousness of texts.

6. Plan to publish. Knowing that writing will be published enhances a writer's sense of audience as he writes and revises. "Going public" helps writers develop an acute sense of "how this is going to sound" to someone else, and helps them see revision and

correction in a different way. Charlie Moran, at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, says publishing work at the end of the semester helps teachers feel more justified, and thus less guilty about doing less responding at home. Publishing also grants honor and dignity to students' work, often for the first time.

As we read that by the end of the decade, thirty percent of all incoming college students will have a language other than English as their first language, and as we read reports of national concern about students' decreasing literacy skills, the issue of how teachers spend their time and the relationship between time and effectiveness becomes more urgent.

By teachers doing less responding, the students learn more. They assume authority and control over their own texts and assume responsibility for revision and copy-editing. Students are empowered by the dynamics of interactive learning. As for me, as a result of cutting down on the hours I spend responding, I am a happier teacher.

By doing less, we help our students and we also help ourselves. We make our jobs easier. By doing less, teachers can be liberated, freed from the onerous task of endless responding to reclaim the pleasures of teaching writing. Thank you.

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